THE PERIL OF SIMPLICITY

April 27, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

"'If you are the Messiah, say so plainly.' 'I have told you,' said Jesus, 'but you do not believe. My deeds done in my Father's name are my credentials.'" --John 10:24-25 (NEB)

Scripture
John 10:22-30

In Martin Marty's history of religion in America, Pilgrims in Their Own Land, there is a chapter on those fascinating utopian religious experiments in the 19th century, the product of "a generation of uncompromising dreamers," Marty says, [p. 190]. Among them were the Shakers, a utopian sect brought here in 1774 by Mother Ann Lee. The Shakers are an intriguing chapter in the story of religion in our culture. They lived communally, but were rigidly and carefully celibate. They did not believe in child bearing as a matter of religious principle. They were astonishingly creative, otherwise. The Shakers organized productive farming, produced the first commercial seed in the United States, invented the circular saw, cut nails, a washing machine, flat brooms and metal pen points. [World Book Encyclopedia] Their furniture is elegant in form and function and, of course, its simplicity. The Shaker movement lasted two hundred years in spite of their views on child bearing. Their demise, however, was equally due to what Marty calls the unpleasant reality that "Angelic living did not turn out to be simple at all." [Marty, p. 192] Yet they left a legacy which is very dear to us - and which becomes more precious the more complicated and out of control our world seems. The legacy is expressed eloquently in their lovely hymn:

> "'Tis the gift to be simple,
> 'Tis the gift to be free,
> 'Tis the gift to come down
> Where we ought to be."

This is a sermon on the peril of simplicity. It is not a likely theme because we are fond of the idea of simplicity. We are enarmored with it. "Simplifying our life style" is the new mantra of the ecologically and socially aware. We long for simplicity. We experience nostalgia for a world which, in retrospect, seems amazingly simple and uncomplicated. And that's not entirely a figment of our imagination. At least that is the contention of John Naisbett in the last chapter of his bestseller Megatrends.

"Many of us," Naisbett observed, whose formative years were the 30's,

40's, 50's and even early 60's, "lived simple lives portrayed in such television series as "Leave it to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best."

"Either we got married or we didn't
(And, of course, we almost always did.)
Either we worked nine to five or we didn't.
Ford or Chevy
Chocolate or Vanilla."

Sometimes we had a third choice: we could read Look, Life, or The Saturday Evening Post, but "It was a society of mass markets and mass market advertising, where homogenized tastes were easily satisfied with few product choices." "Remember," he asks, "when bathtubs were white, telephones were black, and checks were green?"

We are living today in a world of unprecendented and confusing diversity. It is a multiple-option society, and the very complexity of all the options produces stress which produces anxiety which in turn produces the powerful nostalgia we feel. Advertising knows about it and continues to use simplicity and "back to simple verities" and nature's own way to sell bread and high-tech sound systems, and chemically complex fertilizers.

The fact is that life is not simple. "There are 752 different models of cars and trucks sold in the United States - and that's not counting the colors they come in... "You can, if you have the mind to, locate 2,500 different kinds of light bulbs," Naisbett observes. [Megatrends, p. 231 ff]

Our language itself reflects the new complexity of life. Edwin Neuman wrote a wonderful book, Strictly Speaking, which demonstrated that obtuseness of public language was clearly inhibiting communication and often disguising the truth. Professional politicians become expert at it. When the T.V. reporter asks the Cabinet Secretary whether the government intended to do what it did, the Secretary must do something no politician in history has ever had to do and that is to be instantaneously and rationally accountable to the constituency and so the Secretary will talk a very long time wihtout answering the question. Neuman cites an old Meet the Press transcript on which New York Mayor Robert Wagner was asked if he endorsed Robert Kennedy's candidacy for the Senate. Wagner set some kind of journalistic record by droning on for three full pages at the end of which he had not yet said yes or no. [pp. 82-84] I will never forget my final, grudging and reluctant acknowledgment that the phrase, "Protective Reaction Strike" was an intentionally complex idiom to disguise the fact that we were dumping napalm on Vietnamese villages.

The longing for simplicity, clarity, plainness, is real and it is understandable perhaps nowhere more so than in religion. I was standing in an out-of-the-way corner at a wedding rehearsal party at which I was a guest, minding my own business, when one of the ushers, a young man recently graduated from college approached and began the conversation by asking "Are you a Christian?" I said, "Yes. In fact, I'm a minister, a Presbyterian." Those facts were not related for him so he continued "I mean, you know, are you, you know, Born Again?" I should have known better but I responded, "Well now, that depends on what you mean." And with all

the wisdom of his twenty two years he interrupted: "How come you Presbyterians can't say yes or no? It's a simple question, isn't it? Either you are or you aren't." It was not, from that point on, a terribly edifying interchange.

There is a foundation of simplicity upon which the faith of everyone of us rests. It is very much like the simplicity of receiving a wonderful gift we have not deserved. It has to do with elemental, irreducible things. There is a time and a place when God's gift of love in Jesus Chirst needs no elaboration, no exegesis, no interpretation, only affirmation, proclamation, celebration. But I confess that I have not found it always simple... My testimony is that the Gospel has demanded and does demand that I struggle, wrestle, argue with it: that it challenges some assumptions I really don't want challenged - and worse yet, that it calls me to confront the complexity of the world in which I live with openness and integrity. It is not simple...and I would propose that when we are urged to preach or believe the "simple gospel" what we are often hearing is an invitation to simple-mindedness. I propose that there is seductive peril in that, and that it is the word of the Lord in the text for the day.

The setting is the Jerusalem Temple, the Feast of Dedication, Hanukkah, which celebrates the liberating, cleansing and rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus two centuries earlier. Jesus was walking in the covered portico inside the Temple wall when he was approached by a group of people who said, in effect, "just preach the simple gospel. How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, say so plainly."

That may have been a trap. If he had said, "Yes, I am the Christ," presumably they could have had him arrested for blasphemy. On the other hand it could have been a sincere question. They wanted to know, in simple, plain terms, if he was the Christ.

His response is intriguing: "I have told you and you do not believe." In point of fact, he had not told them, at least in their terms. No where in the Gospel does Jesus answer that question directly and simply. Earlier in the Fourth Gospel he has referred to himself as Light of the World, Bread of Life, Good Shepherd, Son of Man. But he did not say "Yes. I am the Christ, the Messiah for whom you have been waiting." [See Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel of John, Vol. I, p. 402] Instead, he said, "Look at my works. They are my credentials. If they don't convince you nothing will."

Why do you suppose he didn't answer simply? Why all the angling obtuseness? Why the intentional obscurity of parables and similes and metaphors which have kept us at our desks studying for 2,000 years? Why the scandal of what the scholars know as the "Messianic Secret"? - that peculiar order he kept giving to the disciples not to tell people about him. And why that final, awesome silence in front of Pontius Pilate?

Surely part of it is that he was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting. When the delegation questioned him in the Temple they had in mind a particular definition of Messiah. He did not want to encourage,

apparently, the over-heated patriotism that saw in the coming Messiah a guerilla leader who would lead the revolution agains Rome. But surely it is more than that. Surely it is a matter that some questions, the really important ones, are not answered simply, with one word. Surely it is a matter of his own knowing that men and women answer the important religious questions about the meaning of life and the goal of life and to whom to give one's life - all of which is wrapped up in the answer of who he is - for themselves, after a struggle, and that the conclusion does not repose in that trophy case of documented truths by which we live so much as in the place in our hearts where faith and hope belong. It is not simple!

What a temptation for him, however, to say "Yes, I am the Messiah. Take it or leave it." and how painful it must have been for him to watch good, strong people who perhaps were attracted to him, liked what he said, scratch their heads and ponder his identity and then turn away because of their insistance on simplcity. What a painful dilemma for the church in a complex world. The clientel want simple answers that's clear. The more complex life becomes, the better simple answers sound. There is pain watching people abandon those places where complexity is appreciated and the struggle of faith goes on, for the places where the answers are clear and the Gospel simple and often simple-minded.

Frederick Buechner writes: "The pressure on the preacher is to promote the Gospel, to sell Christ as an answer that outshines all the others." [Telling the Truth, p. 36] There is, Ernest Campbell suggests, in a wonderful treatment of this passage, "a heresy of exactness" which the church must resist. [Locked In a Room With Open Doors, p. 50] History will document that. The harder we try to pin the Gospel down in simple assertions the further we stray from its intent. The more zealous about orthodoxy, the smaller the circle becomes until the church appears as a pathetically exclusive club, ensconsed in its elegantly dated parlours, pondering its wonderful past. When Charles Darwin published The Origin of the Species the church responded with intentional simple-mindedness called fundamentalism in which all the answers are clear. As scientists continue to inquire about the origin of the universe and the nature of matter, simple-mindedness is experiencing a renaissance called creationism.

E. B. White, who knew how to write plainly better than anyone, once observed: "I predict a bright future for complexity. Have you ever considered how complicated things can get - what with one thing leading to another?" And the distinguished American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead: "Seek simplicity and then distrust it." [See Bennis and Nanus, Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge, pp. 10-11] The times are complex and simple solutions may not only be inadequate but detrimental.

These are great and important and dangerous days. The questions of how we shall live into the future are at the head of the agenda. The matter of the meaning and quality of life which our children and their children will lead is now being adjudicated. The Christian church is part of this world, and at its best it is a contributing participant in the process. Our witness is not to be confined to our Sunday morning family reunions. We are called to speak our word out there where nothing is simple: where no one listens, when simplicity masquerades simple-mindedness. We may wish that the profound and difficult questions before

us would go away. But they will not. Coping with terrorism, the rights of different groups of people within society, accessibility birth control, abortion - who, when, under what conditions, the virtual disappearance of the family we keep insisting is the solution to all our problems, none of them are simple. All of them interface with the Gospel of a God who loves the world so much as to send an only son to save it. All of them desparately need the sensitivity and love and grace which are characteristic of the people of Jesus Christ combined with intelligence and imagination and appreciation of complexity.

Jesus refused to respond in a simple answer. So it seems right and healthy to protect the mystery of that which cannot be explained and to celebrate the complexity of a Gospel that means to be taken seriously by complex men and women living in a complex world.

When in grief, in the awful aftershock of personal loss, someone asks, "Why? Why did this happen?" we must recognize the peril of simplicity and acknowledge the honest appropriateness of saying "I don't know." In fact, there is a sense in which honest religion always begins with that confession, with a reverent agnosticism, with the acknowledgment that there is more to this religion, more to the Gospel, more to Jesus Christ, much, much more to God than we will ever be able to describe, define or comprehend.

I suspect that there is no one here this morning who does not long for simplicity. I suspect that at least part of the reason all of us are here is that we are weary - bone tired - of the hectic, unmanageable complexity of our lives. I suspect many of us are looking for blessed simplicity somewhere - anywhere - in this hectic, out-of-control world. I suspect that each of us, preacher included, is inclined to glance backward in nostalgia for a time when things seemed more managaeable, more understandable, simpler. If that is the case; or if you have flirted with simple answers and discovered that your own integrity would not allow it, please hear again the word of God in the Gospel according to John. It is for us.

Jesus would not submit himself to simple-mindedness. He did not tell them plainly. Apparently he had something else in mind. Apparently he wanted to call something out of them, something of their creative, wonderfully subtle minds as well as their stout hearts. He wanted disciples who could be faithful without the simplicity they wished, disciples willng to follow on a life-pilgrimage of wrtestling and struggling and growing. He wanted, as his pilgrim people, men and women willing to bet their lives on him in the absence of the simple answers they thought they needed.

So, hear this word to you, who would be his man or woman today. The secular city would have us abandon this faith as obsolete, irrational, unbelievable. The anxiety produced by our complex world push us to say more than we can with integrity. In the middle of that, where you and I must do our living and moving and being, hear the word of the Lord. Jesus Christ wants us to be there in the middle of a world as wonderfully complex as it can be. We are his people - we are Christians - finally, not on the basis of our theology - or our political stands - or moral causes. We are

Christians finally, not on the basis of the simple answers we can manage - but on the strength of his love for us.

In the wonderful rhythm of this incidnet between Jesus and his inquisitors who want a simple answer, he says to them, finally -

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them...and I give them eternal life and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

Here finally is the simplicity we have been seeking. Here is authentic simplicity.

Jesus would not respond to their demand that he tell them plainly. Because that ultimately is not the Gospel issue.

You may never have it all down simply. But if you follow this Lord - in the complexity of your life in this world, stay close to him, give your life to him - he will know you and love you and stand with you and nothing will ever separate you from him.

It is the only simplicity you need. You can count on it.

God of mystery and majesty, make us strong to live faithfully, We confess to you our longing for simplicity. We confess that we are tempted to compromise the gift of our own integrity in the pursuit of simplicty. Keep us from that. Stand with us as we live daily in a world that resists simple-mindedness. And give us faith open and joyful and strong enough to follow our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.